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ABSTRACT

Investigated are the following: (1) college student preference for a dual-career marriage; (2) factors which lead to this preference; and (3) the effect of these attitudes on patterns of interaction among dating couples. Subjects were 231 dating couples. Questionnaires were utilized, with follow-ups conducted six months, one year, and two years after initial testing. Findings indicate that dual-career marriage is popular among a sizeable proportion of students, with men being more traditional than women; dual-career students are less traditional, with women more likely to attend graduate school, and men more likely to have higher SAT scores; "mismatched" couples appear less satisfied, while traditional couples date more exclusively and give higher estimates of probable marriage; dual-career couples are more likely to report equal power; and mismatched couples are more likely to break up, while traditional couples are more likely to become engaged or married. Although the popularity of dual-career marriage in this sample is striking, it seems unlikely that all of these students will achieve this ideal. Major inconsistencies are evident between ideals and specific attitudes about future work and family commitments. (Author/JLL)

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Dual-Career Relationships: The College Couple Perspective

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Growing numbers of women are rejecting the old notion that they must decide between marriage or a career. Instead, they are attempting to combine both in a dual-career marriage (e.g., Holmstrom, 1972; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976). Men's attitudes toward working wives are also changing (e.g., Kaley, 1971; Komarovsky, 1976). Research on dual-career relationships has typically examined married couples in which the wife works full-time. In our own research, we examined the impact of attitudes towards dual-career marriage among unmarried college couples.

Little is known about the orientations of young unmarried couples towards combining work and marriage. Since major career decisions, such as the choice of a college major or preparation for graduate study, are often made prior to marriage during the college years, this seems a topic of some importance (Angrist & Almquist, 1975). Our research focused on three issues. First, we were interested in the extent to which contemporary college students personally prefer a dual-career marriage model versus a more traditional pattern in which the wife works only parttime or not at all. Second, we were interested in factors that lead or predispose young men and women to prefer a dual-career pattern over more traditional alternatives. Third, we were interested in how attitudes about dual-career marriage -- and possible disagreement between partners -- might affect the patterns of interaction among unmarried college dating couples.

A large-scale study of dating relationships provided an opportunity to investigate these issues. This research was part of the Boston Couples Project conducted by Zick Rubin, Chuck Hill and the first author (described more fully in Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976; Peplau, Rubin & Hill, 1977). In 1972, recruitment letters were sent to a random sample of 5000 sophomores and juniors, half men and half women, at four different schools in the Boston area. Students who were currently in a dating relationship and who expressed interest in our research were invited to participate, along with their current dating

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partner. The 231 couples who took part in our research were predominantly white, middle-class students. Nonetheless, they varied considerably in background, in sex-role attitudes, in their own career plans, etc. Participation in the study involved each partner's filling out a lengthy questionnaire about his or her background, attitudes and current relationship. The study was longitudinal in nature, with follow-ups conducted 6 months, one year and two years after initial testing. These data provide some indication of the "success" of relationships as assessed by continuation of the relationship over a two-year period.

1. How popular is the dual-career model?

The questionnaire asked students to think fifteen years into the future and then to indicate their preference among four possible marriage options. Virtually none of the students listed being single as their first choice. This alternative was preferred by only 6% of men and 6% of women. For students who desired to get married, the most popular alternative was a dual-career marriage. Fully 65% of women and 48% of men said they preferred a marriage in which the wife had a full-time career. Next in popularity was the option of the wife working parttime, endorsed by 24% of women and 26% of men. Finally, the most traditional option of a marriage in which the wife did not work outside the home was preferred by only 5% of women but by 20% of men.

Two patterns emerge in these data. First, dual-career marriage is popular among a sizeable proportion of students in our sample; only a small minority of students prefers the most traditional marriage with the wife as fulltime homemaker. Second, men are consistently more traditional than women in their preferences, being less likely to endorse dual-career marriage and more likely to prefer a fulltime homemaker pattern.

2. Who are the students who prefer a dual-career pattern?

We next examined background characteristics and attitudes of students preferring dual-career marriage versus other alternatives.

Background. Perhaps surprisingly, no relationship was found between the students' preferences for combining work and marriage and any of a set of demographic factors, including measures of whether the student's mother had worked, parent's educational level and religious upbringing.

Sex-role traditionalism. Attitudes about combining work and marriage are part of a more general set of beliefs about sex roles -- about how men and women should behave by virtue of their gender. Our questionnaire included a 10-item sex-role traditionalism scale (Peplau, 1973) and other questions

concerning attitudes towards the women's movement. For all of these measures, there were large, statistically significant relationships between preferred marriage pattern and sex-role traditionalism. Further, consistent with this general pattern, students who preferred a dual-career marriage were less likely than others to want a large family and gave somewhat less importance to having children. Dual-career students were also more liberal on other attitudinal measures, such as their views about premarital sex.

Educational and career plans. For women, there was a significant relationship between preference for a dual-career marriage and personal plans about education and career. As expected, women who wanted a dual-career marriage were more likely to plan to attend graduate school and were four times as likely as more traditional women to seek a doctorate degree. These findings are consistent with evidence that women who actually attain advanced degrees are significantly more likely than other women to work after marriage. In addition, we found that women who wanted a dual-career marriage were more likely to be majoring in non-traditional fields such as the physical sciences and were less likely than other women to major in such "feminine" fields as nursing or education. Additional data suggest that the desire for a dual-career marriage is more closely related to a woman's attitudes than to her abilities, at least among students in our sample. Women who wanted a dual-career marriage did not differ from other women in intellectual abilities as assessed by college grades or SAT scores.

For men, in contrast, there was no relationship between the man's own career plans or college major and his preferred marriage pattern. To some extent this reflects the fact that all men in our sample (as well as all men in our culture) plan to work, regardless of their future wife's employment. Additionally, the majority of men in our sample planned on some graduate training. Of considerable interest, however, is the suggestion in our data that dual-career men are actually higher than other men in ability. While dual-career men did not have higher college grades, they did score significantly higher on both the verbal and quantitative parts of the SAT exam. One interpretation of these data is that high-ability men may be less threatened by the prospect of having a career-oriented wife, and so may be more open to the possibility of a dual-career marriage.

3. Are attitudes about dual-career marriage related to patterns of interaction in dating couples?

To investigate this question, we compared three groups of students: "dual-career" couples in which both partners indicated that dual-career marriage

was their first choice; "traditional" couples in which both partners thought a wife should work only parttime or not at all, and "mismatched" couples in which the woman wanted a dual-career marriage but her current boyfriend did not. (We excluded from our analyses those few cases in which students expressed an interest in remaining single or where the man wanted a dual-career relationship and the woman did not.) These three types of couples were compared with respect to love and intimacy, power, and the longevity of their relationships.

Love and intimacy. Our questionnaire included self-ratings of love, closeness and satisfaction, as well as Rubin's (1970) Love and Liking scales. Comparisons of the three types of couples on measures of love and intimacy showed two basic patterns. First, mismatched couples scored significantly lower than other couples on most measures of intimacy. Mismatched couples also indicated that they had disclosed significantly less to each other on a variety of topics. In short, mismatched couples appeared less satisfied in their current relationship.

Second, dual-career and traditional couples differed in other ways that reflected a more basic difference in liberalism-conservatism. For instance, traditional couples were more likely to be dating each other exclusively, and gave higher estimates of the probability of marrying each other.

The balance of power. Since dual-career relationships reflect a departure from traditional sex roles, it might be expected that couples who prefer this pattern would be less traditional in other ways as well. We predicted that dual-career college couples would be more likely to report an egalitarian balance of power than would other couples. The questionnaire contained several measures of power (described more fully in Peplau, Rubin & Hill, 1976; Peplau, 1978). Overall, about half the couples in our sample reported that their relationship was equal in power. As predicted, dual-career couples were significantly more likely to report equal power than were traditional couples. This finding is related to a more general pattern in our data for the woman's educational plans to have major impact on power in the relationship, tipping the balance of power away from greater male power towards greater equality. At the same time, however, there were many exceptions to this pattern; not all dual-career relationships were egalitarian.

Longevity. Finally, we examined follow-up data concerning which couples were most likely to stay together during the two years of the study. Mismatched couples were nearly twice as likely as others to break up in the year following

our initial testing. Whereas 41% of mismatched couples broke up, only 29% of dual-career and 23% of traditional couples ended their relationships. Consistent with their more conservative orientation, traditional couples were also nearly twice as likely as others to become engaged or married during the period of our followup.

Speculations about the Future

The popularity of a dual-career pattern of marriage among students in our sample is striking. Nearly 2/3rds of women and half of men indicated that this pattern was their own personal preference. It seems unlikely, however, that all of these students will achieve this ideal. In addition to obvious problems faced by women in the labor market, other barriers to the attainment of a dual-career marriage may exist as well. In particular, students in our sample showed major inconsistencies between their abstract endorsement of ideals and their more specific attitudes about future work and family commitments (cf. Komarovsky, 1976). For example, among men and women who wanted a dual-career marriage, a majority also wanted to have children and believed that the mother should stay home fulltime until her children are in school. Just how women are expected to be both fulltime homemakers and fulltime workers is not clear! Further, the majority of students endorsing a dual-career ideal also indicated that they would be uncomfortable if the wife earned more than the husband, or if her job had greater prestige. Thus it appears that many students who want a dual-career relationship also want to retain elements of a more traditional marriage including the norm that the man's work is more prestigeous and the belief that mothers should have primary responsibility for childcare. Just how these student couples will resolve such inconsistencies when the time comes to put their ideals into practice remains to be seen.

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